

L O N D O N

BY

G. K. CHESTERTON

WITH TEN PHOTOGRAPHS BY
ALVIN LANGDON COBURN



A

LONDON





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LONDON

THERE is an old London story that has never lost its loveliness for me. It was about a stout old lady from the country, who travelled round and round the Underground Railway in a circle, because at each station she tried to get out backwards, and at each station the guard pitched her in again, under the impression that she was trying to get in. It is a beautiful story; doing honour alike to the patience of the female sex and the prompt courtesy of the male; it is a song without words. But there is another and milder version (perhaps we might dare to say a more probable version) of the same story. It describes an aged farmer and his daughter travelling the same sad circle, and failing to alight anywhere, partly because of the *impedimenta* of country parcels, but partly also because they were almost satisfied with the staring names of the places set up on the Underground Railway. They thought the "Mansion House" was rather a dark place for



the Lord Mayor to live in. They could detect no bridges through the twilight of "Westminster Bridge," nor any promising park in "St. James' Park Station." They could only suppose that they were in the crypts of "The Temple"; or buried under the foundations of "The Tower."

Nevertheless, I am not quite so certain that this cockney tale against countrymen scores so much as is supposed. The rustic saw the names at least; and nine times out of ten the names are nobler than the things. Let us suppose him as starting westward from the Mansion House, where he commiserated the dim captivity of the Lord Mayor. He would come to another equally gloomy vault in which he would read the word "Blackfriars." It is not a specially cheery word; but it goes back, I imagine, to that great movement, at once dogmatic and democratic, which gave to its followers the fierce and fine name of the "Dogs of God." But at the worst, the mere name of Blackfriars Station is more dignified than the Blackfriars Road. He would pass on to the Temple; and surely the mere word "Temple" is more essential and eternal than either the rich lawyers in its courts, or the poor vagabonds on its Embankment. He will go on to Charing Cross,

where the noblest of English knights and kings set up a cross to his dead queen. But unless his rustic erudition informs him of the fact, he will gain little by getting out of the train, and going to the larger station. Neither porters carrying luggage nor trippers carrying babies, will encourage any conversation about the original sacredness of the spot. He will stop next at a yet more sacred spot, the station called Westminster Bridge, from which he can visit, as Macaulay says, "the place where five generations of statesmen have striven, and the place where they sleep together." By walking across the street from this station he can enter the House of Commons. But, if he is wise, he will stop in the train. He will then arrive at St. James' Park; and (as Mr. Max Beerbohm has truly remarked) he will not meet St. James there.

Yet these mere names that he has seen on a dingy wall, like advertisements, are really the foundation stones of London; and it is right that they should (as it were) be underground. The mere fact that these five names, in a row along the riverside, all bear witness to an ancient religion would tell the rustic in the railway train (supposing him to be of elaborate culture and lightning deduction) the great part of the

history of London. The old Temple Church still stands, full of the tombs of those great and doubtful heroes who signed themselves with the sign of Christ, but who came, rightly or wrongly, to be stamped by their neighbours with the seal of Antichrist. The old Charing Cross is gone; but its very absence is as much of a historical monument as itself. For the Puritans pulled it down merely for being a cross; though (as it says in a humorous song of the period) Charing Cross had always refrained from uttering a word against the authority of the Parliament. But these old things, though fundamental, are fragmentary; and whether as ruins or merely as records, will tell the stranger little of what London has been and is, as distinct from Paris or Berlin or Chicago. London is a mediaeval town, as these names testify; but its soul has been sunk deeper under other things than any other town that remembers mediaevalism at all. It is very hard indeed to find London in London.

There is a story (one among many) that there was a settlement before the Romans came, which occupied about the same space that is now occupied by Cannon Street Station. In any case, it is probable that the seed of the city was sown somewhere about that slope of the

riverside. The Romans made it a great town but hardly their greatest town, and the barbarism of the ninth century left it bare. Its second or third foundation as a predominant city belongs, like many such things, to the genius and tenacity of Alfred. He did not indeed hold it as a capital of England, but rather as an outpost of Wessex. From his point of view, London was a suburb of Wantage. But he saw the practical importance of its position towards the river mouth; and he held it tight. The Norman Conquest clinched the condition, which was roughly symbolized by the Tower of London, which for many centuries was a trophy captured and recaptured by opposite factions. But, in the main, London had one political character from first to last. It was always, for good or evil, on the side of the Parliament and against the King. Six hundred years ago, it was the citizens of London who had to stand the charge of the strongest of the Plantagenets in his youth, on the downs round Lewes. Four hundred years afterwards, it was the citizens of London who held the high places of Buckinghamshire, when the army of Charles I threatened London from Oxford. Later still, the Londoners stood solidly against James II and splendidly against George III. Whether

Parliament was worth such fidelity, whether the merchants of the Thames were wise to tie themselves so entirely to the grandes of the counties, is no subject for this place. But that the tradition of the town was sincere and continuous cannot be doubted. To this day the Lord Mayor of London is probably proud that the King of England can only enter London by his leave. That fact is as close a summary of the purely political history of London as one could want. It exactly expresses the victory of the merchants over the central power. It is often observed that the French think the Lord Mayor of London more important than the King. They are an acute people.

This rather surly love of liberty (or rather of independence) is written in the straggling map of London, and proclaimed in its patch-work architecture. There is in it something that every Englishman feels in himself, though he does not always feel it to be good; something of the amateur; something of the eccentric. The nearest phrase is the negative one of "unofficial." London is so English, that it can hardly be called even the capital of England. It is not even the county town of the county in which it stands. That title, I believe, belongs to Brentford, which legend credits

with two kings at once, like Lacedaemon. It is just London. As his French friend said about Browning, its centre is not in the middle. The Parliament sits in London, but not in the City, of London; the City of London is not under the London County Council; and in spite of the opinion of General Choke, the Sovereign does not live in the Tower. Crowded and noisy as it is, there is something shy about London: it is full of secrets and anomalies; and it does not like to be asked what it is for. In this, there is not a little of its history as a sort of half-rebel through so many centuries. Hence it is a city of side streets that only lead into side streets; a city of short cuts—that take a long time. There have been recent changes in the other direction, of course; but the very name of one of them, unintentionally illustrates something not native to the place. A more broad and sweeping thoroughfare, in the Continental manner, was opened between the Strand and Holborn, and called Kingsway. The phrase will serve for a symbol. Through all those creative and characteristic epochs, there was no King's Way through London. There was nothing Napoleonic; no roads that could be properly decorated with his victories, or properly cleared with his cannon. It had something of

the licence and privilege of that Alsatia that was its sore; the little impenetrable kingdom of rascals that revelled down in Whitefriars, where now rascals of a more mournful kind write Imperialist newspapers. One might call mediaeval London a rabbit warren; save that the Trainbands who took their pikes, and 'prentices who caught up their clubs at a bell or a beacon, were certainly anything but rabbits.

I have said that this eccentricity, amounting to secrecy, remains in the very building of London. Some of the finest glimpses of it are got as if through the crack of a door. Our fathers gained freedom of vision through the gap in a fence; just as they often gained freedom of speech through a flaw in an Act of Parliament. In their glorious visions of height or distance, there is always something of the keyhole; just as in their glorious fights for law or liberty, there was always something of the quibble. There is no finer effect than St. Paul's from the foot of its hill in delicate and native weather; for the English climate (I may remark) is the finest in the world. I assume, of course, that the spectator is a serious mystic (that is, a materialist also) and appreciates the bodily beauty of heights, which should always be seen from below. The Devil takes us to the top of an ex-

ceeding high mountain, and makes us dizzy; but God lets us look at the mountain. Yet this mountain made by man can only be seen in London by "sighting;" by getting it between two houses, as a pilot steers between two rocks. Get the sighting wrong and you will see only a public-house, or (what is much worse) a shop full of newspapers. Had either a French or a Prussian temple commanded such an eminence, the whole hill would have been swept bare as with a sabre and studded with statues and gardens, that it might be seen from afar. Only I should not like it so much. But then I was born in London.

PLATES

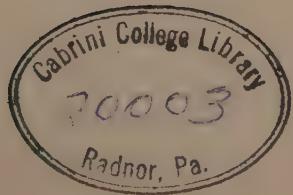
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I







III

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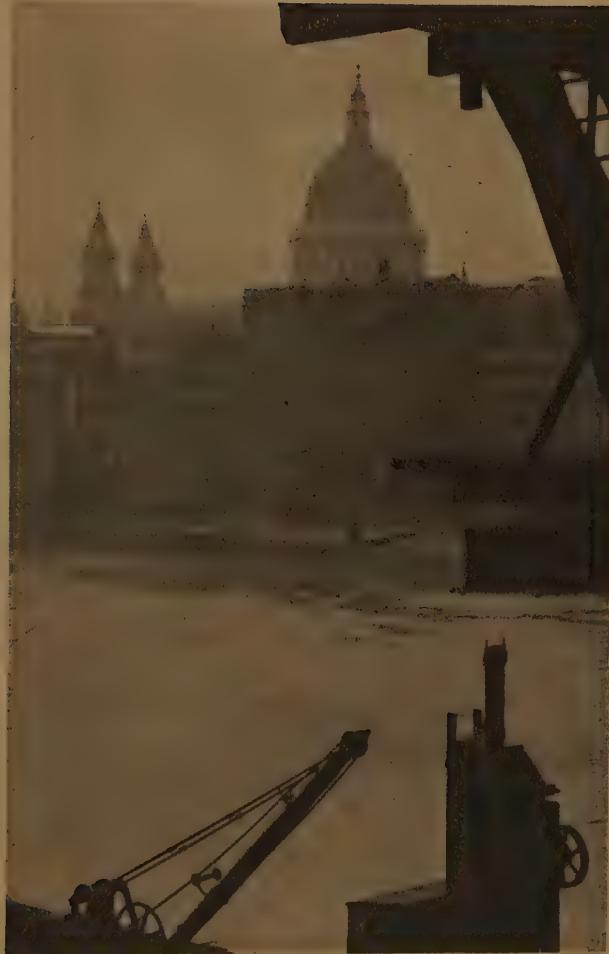
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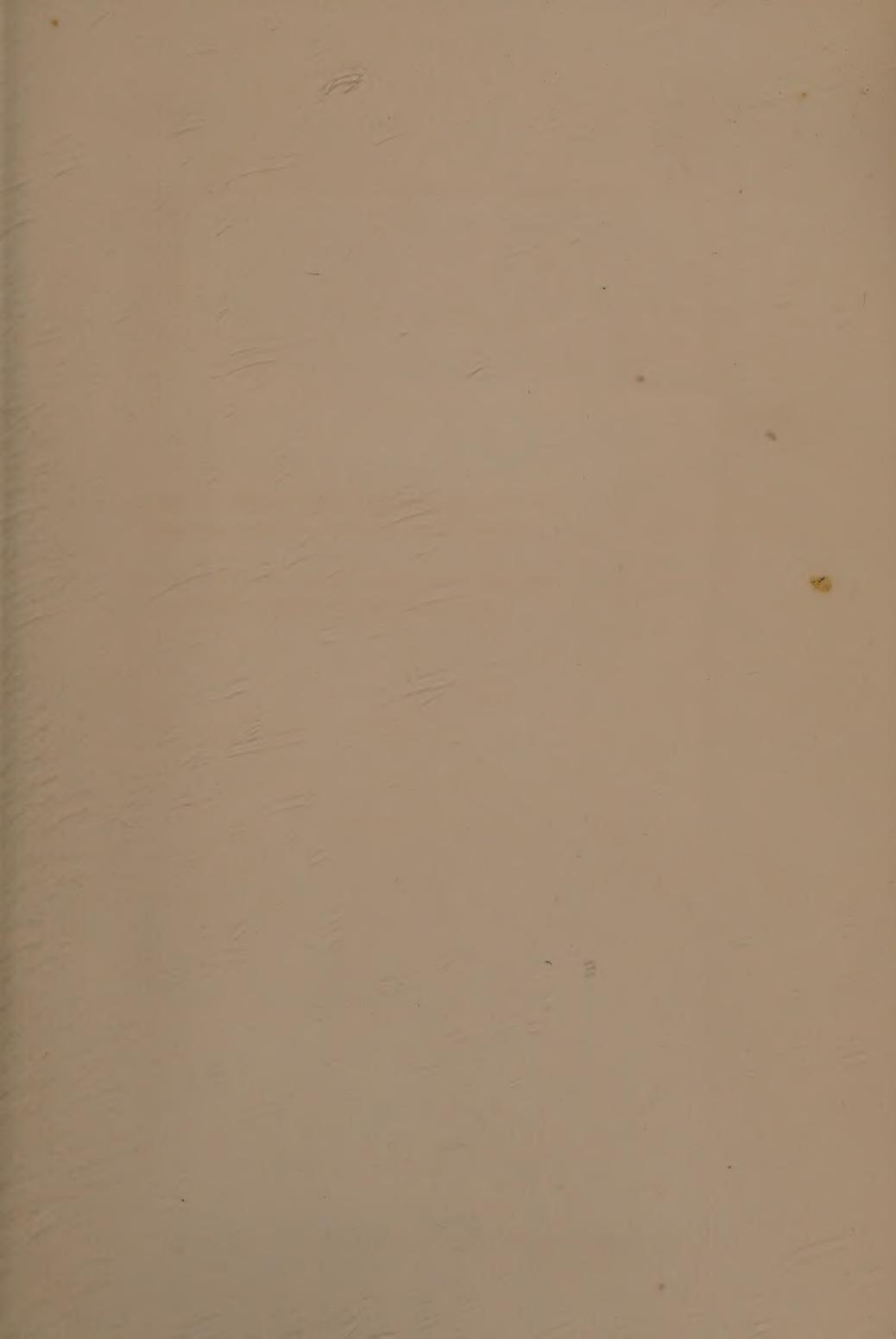






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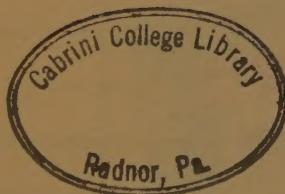
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